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SUBJECT: RULE OF LAW LEADER GIVES HER TAKE ON JOINING THE
RULING COALITION

REF: A. YEREVAN 86

[1](#)B. YEREVAN 1481

Classified By: CDA ROBIN PHILLIPS, REASONS 1.4 B/D.

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Heghine Bisharian, the new head of the Orinats Yerkir (OY, Rule of Law) faction in parliament, gave us her take on the party's controversial merger with the ruling coalition. Bisharian said snubs by Levon Ter-Petrossian (LTP) conspired against OY merging forces with LTP's camp. She believes that ex-President Kocharian used OY's coalition merger to launch his crackdown. She also regretted the difficulty the public has had understanding OY's decision, but thought the party's work inside government will eventually prove nay-sayers wrong. She confided, however, that partners in the ruling coalition may not be as reform-minded as OY. END SUMMARY.

LTP'S SNUBS DOOM OY'S MERGER

[1](#)2. (SBU) In a recent conversation with Emboff at the National Assembly, Heghine Bisharian of the Orinats Yerkir (Rule of Law) party explained why her then-opposition party unexpectedly -- and controversially -- joined the ruling coalition on February 29. Bisharian is the new head of the party's faction in parliament, a post vacated by party head Artur Baghdassarian who has since been appointed the Secretary of Armenia's National Security Council.

[1](#)3. (SBU) OY's merger with the coalition caught local observers unawares, with OY having staked out strident opposition to the authorities during the pre-election campaign. OY's three principal leaders -- Baghdassarian, Bisharian, and deputy party chief Mher Shahgeldian - had slammed the authorities in their campaign speeches, rallies and interviews. The merger came after LTP unsuccessfully sought OY support for his candidacy during the campaign. Indeed, many of the themes LTP raised against the authorities during the election were poached and amplified by Baghdassarian, who placed a not-so-insignificant third in the election, after President Sargsian and LTP.

[1](#)4. (C) According to Bisharian, LTP had given OY no other choice than to join the ruling coalition. During weeks of negotiations that took place before the elections, Baghdassarian was willing to endorse LTP's presidential bid, as were many senior OY members. These talks broke down, though, when LTP refused to guarantee "certain positions" to

Baghdassarian and his party in the event LTP won the election. (NOTE: Bisharian didn't allude to which "positions," but various sources in both OY and LTP's camps suggest Baghdassarian wanted LTP to appoint him Prime Minister. END NOTE.) Bisharian complained that LTP "wanted to put us on the same level with opposition parties and politicians that have scanty electorates, such as Stepan Demirchian (People's Party), Aram Sargsian (Republic Party), and others," and "have us wait for his post-election decisions." Bisharian said obviously OY could not accept these terms.

15. (C) Bisharian said there was an understanding when the talks broke down, after Baghdassarian and LTP had decided to contest the first round separately, that negotiations would resume before the expected second round of the election. But on the very next day after the breakdown of their talks, LTP publicly lashed out at Baghdassarian, calling him a "traitor" and an ally of then-Prime Minister Serzh Sargsian if he failed to unite his forces with LTP. Bisharian said LTP at this time also initiated a flurry of accusations, threats and demands against OY and Baghdassarian personally, attacks that left OY no incentive to continue future negotiations with LTP.

OY JOINS COALITION

16. (C) Browbeaten by LTP, Bisharian said that OY hence accepted Sargsian's offer to join an expanded ruling coalition which he made after the election. Until that point, the coalition included the Republican, Prosperous Armenia,

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and Dashnak parties, with OY part of the opposition. At the coalition agreement signing, Baghdassarian explained his move to join the authorities -- whom he had been pillorying just days before -- as a way for OY to positively influence the government from within. An OY leader in Gyumri told Emboffs the same thing a few days after the move. Like his boss, the party leader had just days earlier been one of OY's main campaign attack dogs against the ruling authorities.

KOCHARIAN USES MERGER FOR CRACKDOWN

17. (C) Frustrated by the way the merger has been perceived, Bisharian believes that ex-President Kocharian deliberately used OY's entry into the coalition to give him political cover with which to launch his crackdown on LTP and his supporters. The violent police operation to clear Freedom Square of approximately 2,000 encamped LTP supporters began less than 24 hours after OY had joined the coalition in a highly publicized ceremony at PM Sargsian's government offices. Bisharian alleged that Kocharian used the merger to both break up the 10-day-long protests mounted by LTP supporters and to isolate LTP politically -- as the last serious opposition presidential candidate still disputing the election results. Interestingly, Bisharian exonerated new President Sargsian of any role in the fatal crackdown, blaming Kocharian instead for all of the election campaign and post-election developments.

REGRETS OVER PUBLIC MISUNDERSTANDING

18. (C) Bisharian told Emboff she regretted that the Armenian public has had a difficult time understanding the rationale for OY's joining the coalition. She said she is also concerned by the public's buying into LTP's public attacks on OY, and their linking the onset of the March 1 crackdown with their merger, and said the party needed to do more to address these perceptions. She expressed confidence, however, that

the party's reform-minded work within the government - now that it has two ministerial posts -- will eventually show detractors the merits of the merger. (NOTE: Rebranding OY in the public's eye has not been made easier by LTP's continued public scorn. During his May 2 congress, LTP referred to Baghdassarian by the Armenian acronym of his new position as Secretary of the National Secretary Council -- or "A-A-KH-K" -- which literally translates into "yuck" in English. During his speech, LTP referred to Bisharian as the "Deputy To Yuck," accusing her of being a Benedict Arnold as well, noting that she had attacked the authorities in a well-received speech given during one of LTP's own post-election protest rallies. END NOTE.)

DOUBTS ABOUT THE RULING COALITION

¶9. (C) Although Bisharian expressed confidence that President Sargsian and new Prime Minister Tigran Sargsian (no relation) will do their best to introduce needed reforms, she said she detected a palpable distrust between the four members of the ruling coalition. (NOTE: During his April 9 visit to Armenia, DAS Bryza met collectively with key members of the four-party coalition at the Embassy, including OY's Mher Shahgeldian. It was evident at that meeting that Shahgeldian appeared more determined on the necessity of overdue reforms than his three new partners. END NOTE.) In front of Emboff, Bisharian also disparaged the speeches of her coalition colleagues that were delivered during the discussion of the new government program, calling them "declarative, meaningless and unprofessional."

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Bisharian is a forceful politician who comes across as sincere in her commitment to reforms. She is also a loyal foot soldier to party boss Baghdassarian, whose merger with the coalition only reaffirmed the public's (and our own) view of him as an unscrupulous politician for sale to the highest bidder. We have no way of knowing whether Bisharian's account is true, but would not be surprised if LTP did find the price of OY's support too high to pay. It is doubtful

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that OY and Baghdassarian will ever reclaim the robust public following that they enjoyed before the election. We would also not be surprised if the authorities eventually -- and perhaps quickly -- tire of the recyclable Baghdassarian and his more reform-committed colleagues Bisharian and Shahgeldian, particularly as it has become clear that OY has been largely abandoned by its erstwhile electorate.. At that point we'd expect to see Baghdassarian and crew right back where they started, railing against the corruption and injustice of the ruling regime. END COMMENT.
PHILLIPS